

Testimony in favor of HB-5397, An Act Establishing the Office of Gun Violence Prevention and Declaring Gun Violence a Public Health Crisis and SB-477, An Act Concerning the Public Health of Residents of the State

March 26, 2022

Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, ranking members Hwang, Somers and Petit and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Aileen Brill and I live in Westport. I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport (the "Council") and a member of the Council's Advocacy Committee.

The Council is a faith-based, non-sectarian social services agency dedicated to meeting the needs of people at risk and breaking the cycle of poverty and crisis in the Greater Bridgeport area. We have witnessed the devastation wrought by the ongoing threat of violence in Bridgeport. Getting guns off the street is a first step. To that end, the Council partnered with the Bridgeport Police Department in 2021 and carried out two successful gun buybacks. During these events, we also distributed free gun locks and gun safes in an effort to promote awareness of the laws requiring safe storage of firearms in Connecticut. The gun buybacks were funded by the Council, member congregations and private donors who share our passion to make Bridgeport a safe community where families can thrive. We hope to offer another gun buyback this June.

Getting guns off the street is only one component of a comprehensive approach to reducing urban gun violence. Intervention programs are critical to diffusing a crisis and restoring a safe and healthy society. Moreover, a permanent Office of Gun Violence Prevention at the state level is needed to address this public health crisis.

I am testifying in favor of the language in HB-5397, An Act Declaring Gun Violence a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, because it incorporates five important components that should be present in whichever bill is voted out of your committee:

- It declares gun violence a public health crisis.
- It houses the solution in the Department of Public Health where it can have the greatest impact.
- It has mechanisms to include voices of those most impacted by community gun violence.
- It includes a robust data gathering and research capacity to drive evidence-informed grant-making.
- It calls for funding commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis.

We cannot break the cycle of poverty and achieve racial justice if children are not brought up in communities where they can thrive. The Office of Gun Violence Prevention would deliver reliable funding to other types of community-based gun violence prevention programs like

Project Longevity in Bridgeport. According to the Giffords Law Center, gun violence is estimated to directly cost Connecticut taxpayers at least \$90 million annually. Failing to address the cause of this staggering expense is fiscally irresponsible. Investing more in community-based violence prevention programs would not only save lives and reduce the trauma inflicted on these communities, it would save taxpayer money.

While often less publicized, the majority of gun death each year in the United States is a result of suicide. It is imperative that resources are devoted at the State level to address mental health and access to firearms. Gun violence is an urgent public health crisis that demands the State invest more to save lives.

Thank you for your time and service.

Sincerely,

Aileen Brill
Westport, CT

Cc: Senator Will Haskell, Representative Jonathan Steinberg